The Foundation for Art in Cinema

CINEMATHEQUE

The Bay Area showcase for personal and avant-garde film

-- Thursday, September 23, 1982 --

A TRIBUTE TO SIDNEY PETERSON -- With Mr. Peterson in person.

* * Introduction by JAMES BROUGHTON * *

1) The Cage (1947), 25 min., 16mm, silent, produced with the Workshop 20 class of the California School of Fine Arts-- The adventures of a young painter's runaway eyeball and his attempts to get it back...much of it filmed from the p.o.v. of the eyeball.

2) The Lead Shoes (1949), 17 min., 16mm, sound, produced with Workshop 20-- "Very few critics are are deep blue sea divers. Plumbing depths is not their trade and even when the challenge is obvious few are tempted. It is to these few that I now address myself. The Lead Shoes has been identified as a drama of murder and incest and it is true that oedipal themes were employed more than once in Workshop 20 productions. Was this a purely subjective entanglement? Or were we reflecting what might be called objective social conditions. I should remind, if not inform you, that Marysville, California, less than three hours from San Francisco, was, in the late 'forties, the incest capital of the U.S." (Peterson, in The Dark Of The Screen)

3) Clinic Of Stumble (1947), 17 min., 16mm, sound, co-produced and photographed by Hy Hirsh-- One of Peterson's most rarely shown films, growing out of his fascination with dance .

4) Man In A Bubble (1981), 15 min., 16mm, sound-- The first film produced by Peterson in nearly 30 years, Man In A Bubble is a modern-day 'city symphony', portraying people in all manners of urban isolation.

* * * Discussion Period and Brief Intermission * * *

5) The Potted Psalm (1946), 25 min., 16mm, silent, produced in collaboration with James Broughton-- The film which initiated the "San Francisco film Renaissance" of the late 1940's (it was also the first film for both Broughton and Peterson), The Potted Psalm caused an uproar when it showed at the Museum of Modern Art's 'Art In Cinema Society' screening of 1947. "The premiere was an evening to be remembered. James and I stood in the rear of the hall. There were roars of silence. It was as though people had forgotten to breathe...As the lights came up, James had to dash off to the country. He missed the grim faces of the acutely disturbed filing out. There was no eye contact...When James returned to San Francisco, his friends wouldn't speak to him. Then, strangely, the Art In Cinema Society put it on again and this time the audience came prepared. The Sanity in Art Society, otherwise known as the Western Art Association, attended in a body, all four hundred odd of it. Two minutes into the film the rose, en masse , and filed out. The rest is minihistory...

(OVER)

What may have been regarded as an unlikely collaboration is, I now think, best explained as a shared affinity for the Nonsensical, a mutual respect for the Jarry-Carroll "principle of convertibility" (of which ambiguity has been described as a "stylistic manifestation") and a strong feeling for the extempore mode. In his entrancing The Raven and the Writing-Desk, 1976, Francis Huxley defines Nonsense as "a logical game played with feeling by at least two people, in a spirit of self-contradiction, in such a way that one thing leads to the other to the constant surprise and mutual enthusiasm of both parties..." p. 10. To which one might add Baudelaire's maxim: "Next to the pleasure of being surprised there is no greater pleasure than to cause surprise." "

(Peterson, The Dark Of The Screen)

6) The Petrified Dog (1948), 17 min., 16mm , sound, produced with Workshop 20 -- "The film takes its title from the statue of a lion seen repeatedly throughout the film and from an allusion to the freezing of the camera's motion, which we see first in the background of the film's titles. In theme, it might be called the further adventures of Alice In Wonderland...Peterson operated the camera himself this time. He eschewed the dynamic movements that characterize all his other films except for a few timid pans and some brief moving shots of the lion-statue, both normal and upside-down. The stasis of the camera functions organically within the film: there is a sense that the episodes and gags are eternal, contiguous realities, not progressive events, and the camera style emphasizes the discreteness and fixity of the separate scenes, while the use of slow and fast motion brackets them.."

(Sitney, Visionary Film)

A WINE AND CHEESE RECEPTION WITH MR. PETERSON WILL FOLLOW THE SCREENING

Sidney Peterson was born in 1905 in Oakland, Ca. He started out to be a sculptor, then joined the merchant marines and travelled throughout the world. After studying medicne for three years at the Univ. of California, he became an architectural draftsman, but left this in order to make THE POTTED PSALM with James Broughton. This film led to a teaching job at the California School of Fine Arts in 1947 (now the S.F. Art Institute) where Mr. Peterson initiated the first filmmaking courses. It was during his semesters there that the group of avant-garde films which were instrumental in the successive development of American 'underground' films were made. After leaving the Art school, Mr. Peterson founded a film company in Seattle, spent two years developing a study program on television for MOMA in N.Y.C., and went to Hollywood where he wrote scenarios for UPA and Walt Disney. Among his UPA scripts is the highly regarded THE MERRY GO-ROUND IN THE JUNGLE, about Henri Rousseau. He has also published a novel, A FLY IN THE PIGMENT, and the recent book of memoirs, THE DARK OF THE SCREEN. Sidney Peterson currently lives in New York City.